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ABSTRACT

Expected Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSHs) and assigned LCSHs for 161 books requested by faculty in sociology, anthropology, and social work were compared to gauge the likely success of an online subject catalog search for those works. For 80% of the titles checked, inspection of the ninth edition of "Library of Congress Subject Headings" resulted in successful access. Subject searching was more effective for social work titles than for works in anthropology or sociology. Analysis of the comparisons expected with actual LCSHs revealed three types of subject access problems that could be addressed in online catalogs with the use of keyword-in-title, combinatorial, and cross-referenced features. The data also showed that shelf browsing in these three social science fields would not be a systematic or reliable way in which to locate desired books. (There are 14 references.) (Author/EW)

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SUBJECT ACCESS TO BOOKS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES:

A PUBLIC SERVICES VIEWPOINT

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This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Kentucky Library Association, October 2, 1986, in Louisville, KY

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ABSTRACT

Expected Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSHs) and assigned LCSHs for 161 books requested by Faculty in Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work were compared to gauge the likely success of a subject catalog search for those works. For 80% of the titles checked, inspection of the 9th Edition of Library of Congress Subject Headings resulted in successful access. Subject searching was more effective for social work titles than for works in anthropology or sociology. Analysis of the comparisions of expected with actual LCSHs revealed three types of subject access problem, most of which would be surmounted in online catalogs designed with keyword-in-title, combinatorial, and cross-reference features.

Access to a library's collection of books in Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work via the library's subject catalog often eludes students and faculty in those fields. Subject access is of direct concern to general and specialized reference librarians as well as to technical services librarians. Desk librarians are often confronted with questions such as, "Do you have any information on drug abuse among priests, or in prison populations, or among particular ethnic groups? I need at least one book for this paper I have to write for my Social Deviance class." To address such questions, they often consult the "Big Red Volumes" (Library of Congress Subject Headings, now in its 10th Ed.) to determine the best subject heading (LCSH) or even the most promising subclass range. Requestors then scan the library's subject catalog under the best heading(s) or browse in a narrowly designated shelf location to find one or more works. My research question is, "How effective will this strategy be in pinpointing one or more books of interest to social scientists and their students?"[1]

In this study, every book order by faculty in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at Western Kentucky University in the 1985-86 academic year was treated as though it were a request for a book on the narrowly circumscribed focus of the specific title, i.e., as a subject search. The operational question became, "How often do the headings assigned by the Library of Congress (LCHSs) to books of known interest to local patrons

1 Success or effectiveness is defined differently, of course, depending on whether a student or faculty patron is looking for one pertinent book or all pertinent books on a topic in a collection. In a sense, every book is unique and is the only work on a subject if we conceive of its subject narrowly enough. In general, a searcher will find more pertinent books on a topic by scanning entries under one best LCSH than by browsing in one best subclass range. (Often, as shall be seen, one can not be certain in advance what is the single best LCSH or single best shelf range.) In any event, I do not test the general hypothesis.

match the best LCSH expected by a reference librarian?" The answer to that question will serve as a crude test of adequacy of subject access to books of known relevance.

Note that I did not ask how often the concepts used by sociologists, anthropologists, and social workers, respectively, correspond to the terminology supplied in library subject catalogs. That question has been answered clearly enough by social scientists: "not nearly enough!" For example, John Christ (1972) found that 23% of the index terms in the widely-respected International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1968) lacked a discernibly equivalent term in the 7th Edition of LCSH; 77% either did match or were sufficiently accessible through clear cross-referencing or slight variation in wording (e.g., Budgets vs. Budgeting). In other tests, he found greatest disparities and he thus concluded that LCSHs do not satisfactorily describe sociological works in terms that sociologists employ. Smalley's finding among political scientists was similar. She found that "the greater the subject familiarity of a researcher, the less effective the researcher will be at matching his information needs against the subject catalogs of libraries." (1980, pp. 44, emphasis supplied). Since the conceptual frames of reference differ between librarian and social scientist, such a tendency should surprise no one. Bates (1977) also found that psychology and economics graduate students fared worse than library science graduate students in selecting appropriate LCSHs in psychology and economics, respectively. Catalog familiarity seems more important than subject familiarity in tapping a library's holdings on a subject. That, however, is not the point at issue.

There is no need to dwell upon criticisms leveled at subject cataloging practices of the Library of Congress by those outside of librarianship (e.g.,

Soudek, 1983). Neither will I target the inconsistency in usage of terms both within and between the various social sciences, even though this variability may produce and explain more pronounced subject access problems than in the natural sciences. In this study, I was determined to focus upon access problems which librarians alone can resolve (McCarthy, 1986; Dickinson, 1976). The question I posed presumes that user requests are translated into reasonable LCSHs which are then compared with actual LCSHs assigned those requested works.

METHOD

Are the LCSHs and/or subclass ranges identified in the 9th Edition of LCSH and relevant classification schedules successful access points to works of known interest? I addressed this question for the 173 books ordered through me by faculty in WKU's Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work between August 1985 and April 1986. I treated the requests as simulated subject inquiries for books that a general or specialized reference librarian might realistically receive. Thus, a request for Alcoholic Priests: A Sociological Study was analyzed in this investigation as a query for any book about alcoholic priests, no titles known. Details of my method are given in the Appendix on Research Method.

Due to inadequate data, I abandoned a comparison of anticipated subclass range for a book with its actual classification. The LCSH, the index to the LC Classification Schedule for Sociology (1980), and one other tool (Williams et al, 1972) identified promising subclass expectations for only about one-half of the subjects "translated" from the book requests. Implications for the reference librarian who would recommend shelf-browsing in these subject areas should be apparent. I should also note that the WKU libraries employs a

COM catalog which (like may OPACs) does not contain cross-references; this fact underscores the importance of using the LCSH volumes in subject catalog searches.

Of the initial 173 requests, 161 comparisons of expected with actual LCSH could be drawn. Before turning to these results, I must issue two disclaimers. I made no attempt to establish that the LCSHs I anticipated from perusal of LCSH matched those of another librarian. Thus, the reliability of my method and results is open to question. Also, I did not cross-check with faculty requestors my choice of LCSHs to insure that my understanding of a book's subject focus (known to me usually only through its bibliographic features) matched theirs. In the real world, the reference librarian would have an opportunity to do that. Thus, validity questions could arise. Given these caveats, I applied no statistical tests to the findings. The main purpose of my exploration was to alert practicing reference librarians to the benefits and the limits of subject catalog "browsing." If I have uncovered a persistent pitfall or two heretofore oblivious to me and possibly to colleagues, I consider that the investigation has been worth the effort.

RESULTS

By and large, descriptive heading expectations were met. In four-fifths of the 161 LCSH comparisons, the searcher of the subject catalog would quickly have hit upon the book desired. The results for the three subject fields is shown in the Table below. It shows that sociological works posed slightly more retrieval problems than anthropological ones, but both posed more than

did works in Social Work.[2] Six book requests for which no LCSH could be anticipated (and thus excluded from comparisons) dealt with concepts, methods, or perspectives not yet "sanctioned" by the Library of Congress even as 'refer from' terms. Examples were books on "social impact assessment," "deinstitutionalization," and "dual-career couples." No synonyms for these came to mind; one can imagine a keyword-in-title capability in a library catalog alleviating such problems.

TABLE. LIKELY SUCCESS OF SUBJECT BROWSING FOR TITLES BY DISCIPLINE

DISCIPLINE	CLEAR SUBJECT MATCH	SUBJECT ACCESS PROBLEM	TOTAL REQUESTS*
ANTHROPOLOGY	19	6	25 (+2)
SOCIAL WORK	50	5	55 (+3)
SOCIOLOGY	59	22	81 (+7)
TOTAL	128 (79.5%)	33 (21.5%)	161 (+12)

*Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of books for which no comparisons could be made.

INTERPRETATION

Three types of subject access problems arose in this survey of LCSH correspondence. I will list and illustrate each of the three types.

I. THE LCSH IS TOO BROAD TO SENSIBLY BROWSE IN FOR PERTINENT TITLES/WORKS. NO 'SEE' REFERENCES TO NARROWER LCSHs PROVIDED.

Although technically a "match" between expected and actual LCSH, at times one can not rapidly zero-in upon pertinent works because the range of topics accessible only through one general LCSH is too broad. Works on sociological

2 The discipline of requestor and work requested merged almost completely. All 27 of the works ordered by the one anthropologist, all 58 of those ordered by social work faculty, and 84 ordered by nine different sociologists could be construed to be within their respective fields. Books ordered by nine people (as in sociology) are likely to be more diverse in focus than books ordered by one or two persons. That fact alone may account for the differences in result, but that is sheer speculation.

theory and on the abstract focus of "society" are not served well by LCSHs or by HM-HX class schedules. I echo Wepsiec's complaint that 'SOCIOLOGY' as an LCSH subsumes introductory textbooks, works of theory regarding society and its constituent elements, and works about the discipline itself. To find books on society qua society, one could try SOCIAL SYSTEMS, SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, or SOCIAL STRUCTURE. A few specific schools of sociological theory (e.g., symbolic interactionism) are represented recently by LCSHs but general browsing in theory may prove frustrating for anyone driven by the "least effort" principle. Wepsiec recommended a reconfiguration of LCSHs more in tune with actual sociological usage. I might add that in situations such as this, knowledge of a field and its major writers is an indispensable asset for the reference librarian.

II. AT LEAST TWO LCSHs ARE NEEDED TO MATCH THE FOCUS OF A WORK BUT ACCESS IS NOT FOUND UNDER BOTH EQUALLY APPLICABLE LCSHs.

The book, Capitalism, Class Conflict, and the Middle Class, exemplifies this dilemma. I translated this book request into a search for it under SOCIAL CONFLICT (as referred from "Class Conflict") and under CAPITALISM. It was listed under the latter term but not the former. Keeping in mind that word-order in a title does not necessarily reflect subject emphasis (and also remembering that, in my simulation, I did not know book title), I checked under SOCIAL CONFLICT first because, following the tactic of always trying the heading which one expects the fewest entries when two headings seem equally probable, I expected a quicker "hit." This is also a "Principle of Least Effort!" I was foiled a number of times in my first LCSH check but did locate the title with the second LCSH tried. This is a partial-match situation. My point is that such a work should be accessible under both or all of its pertinent emphases. A user-friendly subject catalog will not unduly tax the patience of the searcher. The extra-patient searcher would have eventually

overcome both of these types of subject access problem. How many of our patrons would?

III. INEXPLICABLE CATALOGING DECISIONS

In this residual category are the worst but, fortunately, the rarest cases. They are nonetheless serious because one would fail to identify relevant books in a collection solely due to a complete mismatch between one's expectations (drawn from recent editions of LCSH) and assigned LCSHs. For example, one is directed by LCSH to CROMLECHS (GN 790-792) when looking for books on "stone circles." Yet, a title search of the book shows only a tracing for INDIANS OF NORTH AMERICA and a subclass designation of E 78. I also spotted a couple of cases where a term assigned as major subject trace was found in neither edition (9th or 10th) of LCSH: actual entry under SPORTS - SOCIAL ASPECTS and under ALCOHOL AND THE CLERGY, respectively, neither of which was suggested as a lead by LCSH editions. The latter mismatch means that a reference librarian might have "stuck out" in attempts to find a work on the hypothetical question posed in my first paragraph.

What is striking about all three types of subject access problem delineated (and in cases where no LCSH suggests itself at all) is that keyword-in-title or Boolean (combinatorial) features would surmount nearly every difficulty faced in this study. These two features are cost-prohibitive in conventional catalogs but are being designed into many OPAC systems. On-line catalogs with such features will increase access points and thus enhance our ability to "seek and find" books in our collections.

SHELF-BROWSING PROBLEMS

Had comparisons of expected and actual subclassifications not been thwarted in this study, other dilemmas would have been revealed. Often, when subject cataloging matched expectation, two or more widely-dispersed subclass

ranges were represented under a specific LCSH. For example, "COMMUNITY" as a focus in sociology leads catalog-users to the 'HNs' and to the 'HTs' in about even measure. Works on OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE can direct one to HT 600 or to HN 90. The source of this duality, I suspect, is the interdisciplinary nature of many foci in the social sciences which present LC catalogers with many formidable choices. Another tendency which to the sophisticated user's mind impairs classification decisions is LC's tendency to stress entity rather than author's approach to subject entity. A requested book entitled Violence: A Philosophical Approach was tracked via VIOLENCE as LCSH but received a sociological call number (HM 281) rather than one in Philosophy; a book entitled Suicide: an Anthropological Approach was found under SUICIDE but was classed in the 'BF's' not the 'GN's' (anthropology). A book on the "sociology of mental illness" was classed RC 455 (i.e., in psychiatry). Thus, many books traced by one LCSH would be missed by searching just one probable shelf range. How often this must happen in academic libraries!

CONCLUSIONS

What, then, to conclude about shelf-browsing as a book-finding tactic in sociology, anthropology, or social work? Confidence in the tactic seems misplaced, at least in sociology. While virtually all books requested by the sociologists were sociological, only about one-half of them were classed in the HM-HX range labelled by LC as Sociology. Advocating browsing in that broad range would have been ill-advised for that one-half desired that were classed and shelved elsewhere. The tactic would work tolerably well in Social Work and a few areas such as Criminology (in those two named fields, all requested titles were classed in HV 1-5999 and HV 6000-, respectively), but not in most sub-fields.

To rely upon shelf-browsing as a systematic or reliable locator of desired works is thus strongly discouraged. I underscore this point in light of the findings of Greene and of Hyman on the searching habits of faculty in libraries. Greene (1977) found that shelf-browsing was the most highly rated and reported strategy of faculty scientists in finding useful books. Hyman (1971) discovered that advanced researchers, in particular, idealized browsing as an approach to serendipitously locating important works. Shelf-browsing takes many forms, no doubt, but the data in this investigation support the view that even strategic browsing (within relevant specified ranges) has more shortcomings than does intelligent subject catalog browsing. The latter strategy is clearly superior. As OPACs replace COM and card catalogs, that gap will widen even further.

APPENDIX ON RESEARCH METHOD

In May, 1986, I took the following steps with each one of the 173 books ordered at the aëgis of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work during the 1985-86 academic year. Up to two headings were identified as most apropos from LCSH, 9th Edition (a follow-up check in the 10th Edition which arrived in the summer of 1986 on every tenth title ordered produced no change in selection of headings) for each work. Six books were removed from analysis because I could identify no LCSH which remotely fit. For these six, no subject browsing or comparison with actual descriptive cataloging was possible.

To obtain actual points of subject access for the remaining 167 works, I checked the following in turn: a title search of the COM catalog of WKU Libraries' holdings; if that was fruitless, a search via accession number for the book inhouse but not yet in the system to scan a book's Cataloging-in-Publication subject traces; if the work had not yet been received in the Library or had no CIP, I searched OCLC for the pertinent information. For all but six titles, I established LCSHs which I then compared with my expected LCSHs. (Three books had arrived but had no CIP or OCLC-tracked LCSHs. The other three works were "phantoms," being neither received nor found in OCLC's database.)

Wepsiec (1982) has found that the average number of LCSHs assigned to works in Sociology is slightly under two with the model number being one. I suspect that this is significantly lower than in some other disciplines (although I have no evidence) but it is approximately the same as alleged for all LC-cataloged works (several sources, e.g., Cochrane, 1984, p. 336). Among others, Cochrane has urged deeper indexing of titles by LC to improve subject search success.

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